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ABSTRACT

The relationship between law enforcement agencies and the news media is a very crucial part of the public being informed about the events taking place in their community. This relationship has been very adversarial historically and it is of the utmost importance that these two entities strive to improve the working relationship they have with each other so there will be trust between law enforcement and the news media and trust from the public of both entities. Law enforcement agencies must be consistent in releasing accurate, timely information to the news media and the news media must be consistent in presenting this information to the public in a timely, accurate manner, the news media consists of television, radio, newsprint and on-line news providers.

The positive relationship between law enforcement and the news media can be cultivated and nurtured by personnel. This is formed by both entities meeting in person, such as at a media breakfast or luncheon, with each other talking on a personal level and sharing information about each other, finding out about each other's career paths and experiences, their goals for the future and talking about their families. Many things can hinder or delay the release of information, many of which are unavoidable. A key component of keeping the relationship between law enforcement agencies and the news media positive is to explain the reason that certain information cannot be released when requested. When this positive relationship is maintained, both entities are more accountable to the public and the public is better served.

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INTRODUCTION

Relations between the news media and police agencies are of the utmost importance and is quite often one of frustration and distrust. The news media consists of television, radio, newspaper, magazines and electronically transmitted information. The job of the police is to investigate crime, safeguard lives and property, help prevent crime and help prosecutors to successfully prosecute each case. Another very important responsibility of a police organization is to keep the public informed of activities that are acted upon by that agency in the community. These activities include matters of a criminal, civil and public interest nature. Criminal activities such as thefts, burglaries, robberies, assaults and homicide are investigated and reported on. The release of information is not always a one-time event. In the event of a major crime such as a homicide, several additional press releases or press conferences may be necessary to keep the public fully informed on the situation. Civil matters such as disputes over property, divorce matters, occupancy of rental property and other matters where no arrest can be made are part of police duties.

A very positive part of law enforcement is taking part in activities that promote safety to the public, such as personal safety, shopping safety and child safety, to name a few. These types of activities draw the public to their police agency and help to create trust between the community and law enforcement. The job of the news media is to gather the information about what is occurring in the community and report this information to the public. When the news media reports on these positive events, it helps draw all stakeholders together (the public, law enforcement and the media) and helps to create a positive community sentiment. Historically, this relationship has been

an adversarial one, creating a culture of the news media believing the police withholds and hides important information (Jones n.d.) and the police believing the news media puts out information that casts law enforcement in a negative light and will make up information when not given the information they request from the police. The media no longer report the news; they report an agenda, their agenda (Higbie, 2018).

The importance of having a professional and trusting relationship between the news media and the police cannot be overstated. Citizens expect to be kept informed by the news media and in this world of instant gratification, it is more important than ever to get the proper information gathered and disseminated as soon as practical. Law enforcement agencies should have a relationship with the news media that encourages cooperation and mutual assistance and remain vigilant in keeping timely, accurate information flowing smoothly to news media outlets. There will be times when that information cannot be given as quickly as the news media outlets would like. During an investigation, such as a homicide, where time for gathering and following up on information for the investigation is critical, the flow of information to the news media could be somewhat slower. The public perception of both the police and news media is affected by their relationship to and with each other. When the relationship is strained or even non-existent, accurate information does not get to the public in a timely manner. When the police and news media engage in getting to know each other on a more personal basis, there is a trust built between the news media reporters, photographers, assignment editors and managers. This becomes a win-win situation for news media outlets and the police and ultimately, a win for the public as well.

POSITION

Good relationships between the news media and law enforcement is a problem that is not new by any means, but is one that needs to be improved upon and managed. When law enforcement and the news media take steps to get to know more about what each other actually does, relationships change in a positive way (Reeder, 2016). One of the first steps a law enforcement agency should do is establish its credibility. This helps to start the process of building positive relationships and trust with the news media and the public (Garner, 2009). Law enforcement agencies are tasked with solving crime, protecting the public and property, preventing crime and keeping the peace. While these tasks are being accomplished, information is gathered and recorded. Some of this information is very critical to the investigation at hand and cannot be released immediately to the news media. The news media are tasked with gathering information and releasing that information quickly to the public, especially information on very serious incidents. It is important that law enforcement knows the duties, functions and expectations that are placed on the news media. It is equally important that the news media know the functions, expectations and duties that law enforcement agencies are tasked with.

There are several ways that a law enforcement agency can reach out to the news media and develop a trusting relationship. Law enforcement agencies can have ride-along programs for civilians, including news media personnel, where the participant can witness first hand some of the challenges officers face in their day to day duties. Law enforcement agencies use citizen police academy groups to let citizens get a first-hand look at how that agency operates. This type of organization is two-fold. It is an

educational experience for attendees and graduates can become a part of the law enforcement agency and put their newfound knowledge to work. News media representatives could become a part of this type of organization and gain valuable insight as to the challenges that police often face when performing their duties. Officers could also gain insight into what reporters and other news media personnel are expecting and each could then have a better understanding of each other's needs and challenges. By having a media luncheon or media breakfast, members of both entities can get to know each other on a personal level and become much more comfortable around each other, which in turn builds more trust (Cotterman, 2015).

The public will view their police agencies by what they see released by the news media outlets. The media does have more direct access to law enforcement agencies because of the nature of their job and having to get the information for their stories from the law enforcement agencies they rely on. They are not however, controlled by law enforcement and law enforcement is not controlled by the news media. The news media, by broadcasting events that police are involved in, provides the public with a look at what their police are involved in and affords the public with the news they are entitled to (Chernak & Weiss 2005). There are numerous stories that need to be reported daily. Law enforcement agencies should always give accurate, timely information to the news media and the news media should always be careful to report this information accurately. If a breakdown in the trust and cooperation occurs, the timely flow of information could be adversely affected. The federal Freedom of Information Act and state law mandates that certain information be released to the public, however, a written request can be required and then the agency that the

information is requested from has up to 10 business days to supply the information. This would create an unworkable situation for news media organizations because 10-day old information is not news. Legal battles between law enforcement and news media organizations is not a good option when a disagreement over the release of information occurs. The costs of such legal actions can be very expensive and greatly hinders the goals of each organization to serve the public. Police and news media relations obviously suffer when this occurs.

It is very important that the flow of information from law enforcement agencies to the news media is kept open, steady and reliable. The meeting of law enforcement agency personnel and news media personnel should be a priority for both entities. Police administrators, officers and public information officers should not be meeting reporters and photographers for the first time on a crime scene. By meeting in a setting where there is nothing pressing for anyone to perform, a cordial introduction and meet and greet conversation can happen. This begins the process of building a positive relationship between the two entities and helps to facilitate the smooth flow of information from the police to the news media.

During police investigations, officers and investigators often find themselves looking for information to lead them to the perpetrator of the crime or crimes they are investigating. Police officers must have information to be able to solve crime. Often times information is not readily available and so an investigation is slowed or stopped because of it.

The news media deals in information as well and can be used to not only receive information from the police, but also help gather information for the police. The

news media and police should work together and share information with each other. This type of interaction would be very difficult without a level of trust between the news media and police. Law enforcement officers sometimes do not have faith that the media will not disseminate information that would hurt their cases and reporters today do not get the same kind of access to crime scenes and other information they once did. The trust used to extend both ways (Brozek, 2005).

One important function of law enforcement is to prevent crime. Law enforcement agencies that keep the public informed about the agency's needs are more likely to have reduced crime rates, more crimes being solved and fewer citizens being victims of crime. The news media and police seem to have less trouble relying on each other in times of disaster, but this cooperation should be a daily part of their jobs. The sharing of information between the news media and police agencies should become a regular part of the functions of each entity. There will be times when incidents happen that puts a strain on the news media and police relationship. If an officer or law enforcement agency has accusations of some type of corruption or misconduct made against them, it can create an urgency by the news media organizations to report on such accusations as quickly as possible. Investigations into these types of allegations can be time consuming and law enforcement agencies are hesitant to release information too quickly that could prejudice the outcome of the investigation. During these times, police agencies that are open and honest about these situations will nurture the trust and credibility between the two entities.

The roles and responsibilities of police officers has evolved greatly in the past 40 years. The public's perception of what duties officers perform has changed during this

time. Where officers were able to walk a beat in years gone by, now most officers patrol their beats in a police cruiser. This puts a barrier between the citizens and the officer and makes it quite inconvenient for a citizen to get the attention of a passing police officer to have a discussion with or ask a question or voice a concern. Officers are being asked to perform some duties that they are not equipped or properly trained for. An example is having to deal with a person who suffers from mental illness. Mentally ill individuals need professional help that officers are not equipped to provide, however, in many communities across America, there are agencies or organizations that cannot provide the proper assistance to these individuals. If a mentally ill person commits a crime and no other assistance is readily available for the person, police action is the default for the situation, even though it is not always the best option.

The public information officer (PIO) is a vital step in the gathering and disseminating information by law enforcement agencies. Not all law enforcement agencies have public information officers. Research shows the ones who do, have overall, more positive relationship with the news media (Chernak & Weiss, 2005). Cooperation with the media should be encouraged with every member of each law enforcement agency. The public will judge law enforcement and the media by the product that is produced and presented to them. Being professional in their actions and showing accountability will portray a positive image on both sides. Information law enforcement agencies release is a way of being accountable for its responsibilities. If a controversial crime occurs, such as a crime involving a public official or a law enforcement employee, it is imperative for the law enforcement agency to release appropriate information as soon as practical. When incidents are reported to the police,

the public needs to be advised in a timely manner, no matter what the incident is. All incidents should be reported according to department standards no matter if the incident is minor or serious in nature. Consistency in reporting accurate information builds a good reputation for the law enforcement agency and fosters good will with the public and a good working relationship with the news media.

COUNTER POSITION

While the news media and police have the same basic goal of keeping the public informed, each has traditionally performed their functions in a completely different fashion. The news media was considered to be enemies of law enforcement agencies. Law enforcement agencies would withhold every bit of information they could and the news media would try every way they could find to uncover the information they were seeking. At times, some law enforcement agencies would withhold information that could show some type of scandal or embarrassing situation for the agency or its employees. If scandalous behavior is revealed, whether in the police agency or in the new media, it can create a major roadblock in police and news media relationships. If a law enforcement agency makes releasing news media information so difficult that a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request is required for any information released, the flow of information to the news media is severely restricted, and the news media can resort to other sources to get information. Law enforcement agencies must consider that depending on who gives information on incidents to the media, the information could be severely lacking in credibility, may not be factual and may even reflect poorly on police actions and methods.

Traditionally, most police officers and agency leaders were trained to not tell the news media anything and to consider them their adversary. By and large, news media organizations considered law enforcement organizations as adversaries as well. In the present age, law enforcement agencies are developing and implementing ways to improve police and news media relations by participating in activities that create positive relationships (Cotterman, 2015). Law enforcement agencies and the news media both have some team members that are not suited for the job duties they are performing. They bring disrespect and distrust on themselves and to their peers and their profession in general. Most members of law enforcement agencies and the news media are striving to do a professional, honest job and truly serve their community. Law enforcement agencies should realize that the news media is a very important tool that can be used to help solve crime, protect lives and property and help prevent crime (Garner, 2009). These are the very duties that law enforcement agencies are tasked with doing.

Even when a law enforcement agency releases information on a particular crime or occurrence, the news media sometimes sees the events as happening differently (Ericson et al., 1989). Most people form their opinion of a certain event or incident by what they see in the news media. Sometimes these opinions cause the public to get strong feelings about the situation (Surrette, 1998). These feelings can cause a sense of panic, fear or anger with the public. The news media can portray an event in such a way as to change the perception that the public has about it and persistent coverage of these types of events can alter the view and perceived reality the public has on them. Most people don't have contact with the police, therefore the public

does not receive information on crime and other events from the police, but by what they see and hear from news media sources (Bloustien & Israel, 2006).

The news media relies primarily on law enforcement agencies to provide the information for the product they present to the public regarding public safety. Law enforcement agencies have primary ownership of the information (Cooke & Sturges, 2009), but the public expects and has a right to know what this information is. Open records laws require law enforcement agencies to release information about their investigations, but not all information contained in these investigations can be released immediately. Information such as the victim or complainants name, the location, date and time where the incident occurred and what the incident or offense is, can usually be released. In cases of crimes such as sexual assault, where the anonymity of the victim is crucial, the name of the victim is not released. Identity of any witnesses or suspects generally are not released while the case is still an open case still under investigation or a case that is not adjudicated.

RECOMMENDATION

Law enforcement agencies must strive to improve their relationship with all news media sources. This is not a short term, one-time effort to make a few contacts and believe they have created a successful relationship with the media. A true trusting, professional relationship takes time and work. Police organizations must be willing to be open and honest with the media no matter what story content they are releasing. Police agencies should as quickly as practical, release as much information as possible if the police agency itself is involved in some type of scandal. Law enforcement

agencies are scrutinized by the media and public more than any other entity and it is very important for that agency to hold itself accountable to the public.

Trust can be started and built upon in many ways. Law enforcement and media personnel should get to know each other in a setting other than a crime scene. Police officials, such as the public information officer, should meet with reporters, assignment editors, producers and news directors to introduce themselves and start having positive interactions. Some functions that both entities could attend and build these positive relationships are a media breakfast or luncheon, contacting the media when the police organization has a positive public event such as an open house or crime prevention program they are presenting to the public or an organization.

One benefit to having a positive, trusting relationship between these two entities is being able to discuss with each other what their needs are and explain each other's procedures for obtaining and using information. The news media often have deadlines to meet on getting their stories broadcast or published and it is important for them to know that there are times and circumstances where the law enforcement agency cannot release certain, if any, information. This occurs with the law enforcement agency for various reasons, such as being too early in the investigation of the event to have proper information, which cannot be released, without jeopardizing the investigation. There are also laws prohibiting the release of certain information prior to prosecution. When a news reporter asks a police officer a question about an investigation and the officer is unable to answer the question, the officer should explain why it could not be answered, such as answering the question could have an adverse affect on the investigation at hand. Another benefit to a positive, trusting relationship between the news media and

law enforcement is what is referred to as “off the record” information. This is information given that is not part of an official release of information. This type of information can be risky to release and should only be considered if the PIO or other law enforcement official has a strong trust in the news media person they are giving this information to. Off the record information can be very beneficial to both the news media and law enforcement, especially in giving an explanation of why information cannot be released quickly or at all. Public information officers must keep in mind that any microphone can be on and any camera can be rolling.

Law enforcement agencies and news media organizations all want to do the best job they can when doing their jobs. When these two entities build a positive, trusting relationship with each other and work to maintain that relationship, the law enforcement agency, the media and the public all are better served and each organization can work much more efficiently. Law enforcement agencies should have a relationship with the news media that encourages cooperation and mutual assistance and should remain vigilant in keeping timely, accurate information flowing smoothly to news media outlets.

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